

Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes, Inc., Cheshire, CT

Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes, Inc., Waterbury, CT; Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes, Inc., Naugatuck, CT

It was during a beautiful New England Fall day in 2023, when a chance encounter would lead to an on-going demonstration and educational program developed by a collaborative effort of the funeral directors and embalmers of the Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes, Inc. of Cheshire, Waterbury and Naugatuck, Connecticut.

Funeral director Nicole Paquette, and her son, Crichton, dressed in their 18th century colonial clothes to attend "time-traveler" day at the annual Renaissance Faire held in Lebanon, CT. Walking amongst the lords, ladies, knights, princesses and pirates, they spied a small group of festival goers who happened to also be donned in colonial style attire. Naturally, the mother and son approached them.

After a lively discussion of wools, linens, frockcoats and petticoats, Nicole and her son, had learned that the group were members of Ye Olde Lebanon Towne Militia (YOLTM) www.lebanonmilitia.com. This CT based group's mission is to recreate and perpetuate the military and civilian history of the American Revolutionary War Period from 1775-1783. Nicole and Crichton were invited to join the group of men, women and children, and they attended their first meeting in January of 2024. Soon they learned that YOLTM was much more than muskets, cannons, battles, mustering, drilling and marching- the group conducts very rich historical programs and educational demonstrations ("demos") that they bring to events and schools throughout Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

After performing mock heavy artillery (cannon) drills during an early-Spring meeting, Nicole was asked by the President of the militia group, Captain Steve Sanna, if she had any demos. He mentioned battlefield deaths as a possible topic after seeing a sign for a lecturer at a different event. The portrayal of the roles and occupations of women in the late 1800's was indeed limited, but Nicole took the suggestion back to her co-workers at Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes, Inc. and research in a program for "Death Care Practices in New England during the late Colonial Era" began.

The program took several weeks of review, discussion and research amongst the funeral directors and embalmers. Our collective memories were called into lively discussions about the history of early American funeral directing and early embalming practices. Subsequently, a sense of comradery was felt as the staff enjoyed sharing reminiscent times of our mortuary college days, classes and professors. Old outdated mortuary schoolbooks were pulled out from dusty storage, (with regrettably limited information). Wikipedia provided some additional insights and we offered some practical common-sense speculation due to the limitations on certain specific details in the colonial home from the Revolutionary time period.

Due to its unique on-going educational component, Daniel J. Ford, the owner of the Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes, Inc. embraced the opportunities for this program as a way to reach out to various communities to learn about early funeral directing and death care practices. The program not only explains the care of the deceased in battle and at home, but also, very importantly, describes the role of women who were mostly housewives, nurses and mid-wives. However, other women, who might be family, neighbors, or hired help, could be a "layer out of the dead" and/or a "watcher of the dying". This provided the opportunity for funeral director/embalmer Nicole, licensed in both CT and RI for approximately 30 years, to portray her role. But first, she had to "pitch" the demonstration and program to the YOLTM and have the officers approve of it during a later meeting. Luckily, their vote was a unanimous "yes".

With her new home-made linen black petticoat, Nicole transforms into "Goodwife Nicole", a widow who, in order to earn an income, is available for hire as a layer out of the dead. During the demonstration, she uses a folding table covered in linens and wool to accommodate a six-foot tall male mannequin, a wooden pail for water, soap made from tallow and potash, linen wraps/cloths for shrouding, Y-shaped stick to aid in mouth closure, heavy hemp ligature, metal needle, colonial era scissors and knife for internal organ evisceration. She explains the care of the deceased when brought into the home: washing, mouth closure and eyes closure with coins on the eyelids, orifice packing, organ(s) removal during the summer months, shrouding, and placing in the coffin. The roles of other tradesmen and townsfolk are also

explained, such as, the local cabinetmaker for the coffin, clergyman, sexton/bell-ringer/gravedigger, under-bearers, pallbearers and stonecutter. Also incorporated are the community expectations and the negative impacts on the family to have meal and drink, gloves, gold rings, (and sometimes jewelry made from the decedent's hair), along with additional funerary gifts, which led to England passing sumptuary laws to place restrictions and limitations on funerary associated items and clothing.

The Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes, Inc. has provided support with this unique educational program for time and necessary materials, including: linens, research time, and gas mileage to CT events for Nicole to attend. Dan Ford and the staff feel that this is a creative way to promote the funeral industry's history, practices and rituals in a comfortable family setting. The gained knowledge from the program may even inspire younger generations to pursue their curiosity, or better yet, an interest in a career within the funeral services industry, as Nicole has been asked about more modern death care practices. This could positively impact the (perceived) shortage of qualified funeral director and embalmer licensees in Connecticut and other Southern New England states.

Thinking ahead, the funeral home staff have had further discussions to possibly expand the educational program, or create new programs, to include additional related topics in New England concerning: grave robbing or "resurrectionists", the Mercy L. Brown exhumation in Exeter, RI in the late 1900's (which was part of the New England vampire panic), Puritan/Colonial grave art, and death care practices during the American Civil War (with modern arterial embalming).